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At the heart of H.G. Wells' *The Island of Dr. Moreau* lies a transgression; a crossing of an evolutionary boundary that brings us face to face with the abject, and, in doing so, exposes the fragility of the human order. The narrator, Edward Prendick, enters a realm of the abject encountering the perverse Dr. Moreau and his menagerie of Beast Folk, and provoking in him a profound anxiety on his return to London where he finds he is unable to isolate himself from the terrors of late-Victorian society.

The Abject and Abjection

In *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Julia Kristeva identifies the abject as existing at the border between the conscious and unconscious. Following on from Lacanian psychoanalysis, the abject recalls in the subject the pre-Oedipal stage of the infant's development prior to passing through the mirror phase and establishing its own identity by differentiating its *self* from the unity with the mother. The abject represents that which must be "radically excluded" by the subject in order to assert its own identity, defining it not by what it is but by what it is *not*. The abject in western culture is expressed as an abhorrence of blood, vomit, feces, perversion, decay, and, most powerfully, the corpse.

The abject exists as a threat to the identity of the subject. Kristeva expresses this as: "The abject has only one quality of the object – that of being opposed to *I*."[1] The abject reminds the subject of its incompleteness before entering into the third term of development: the name-of-the-father. The abject draws the subject to a state before language, a place prior to signification where we feel a sense of helplessness. By excluding the abject the subject is able to escape being consumed by the symbolic order. The abject and abjection – described by Kristeva as "the primers of our culture"[2] – are the safeguards of the subject confronted with the annihilation of the self, allowing the subject to maintain its identity at the border where meaning collapses.

The abject is perverse, Kristeva writes, because "it neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition, a rule, or law; but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts, uses them, takes advantage of them, better to deny them."[3] The law and the sacred perform a vital role in taming the abject, codifying and ritualizing the imaginary boundary between the conscious and the unconscious into structures that allow society to expel the abject. In Kristeva's own words: "An unshakable adherence to Prohibition and Law is necessary if that perverse interspace of abjection is to be hemmed in and thrust aside. Religion, Morality, Law."[4]

Drawn into the world of the abject we experience both fear and a sense of joy – *jouissance* – being repelled and attracted by that which threatens our very sense of being. Kristeva states that because of the conflicting responses that, "one can understand why so many victims of the abject are its fascinated victims – if not its submissive and willing ones." Abjection is, then, 'above all ambiguity;' at once the Other rejected by the subject to establish itself, but at the same time, also the precondition for the subject's autonomy. [5]

The Island of Dr. Moreau

H.G. Wells' novel[6] is set on a mysterious unnamed island, the location of which remains unspecified though we may infer that it lies in the Pacific Ocean somewhere to the west of the Galapagos Islands. Moreau's island is an imaginary space that lies beyond the limits of

human experience, a realm of the abject produced by volcanic eruptions spewing magma from the mantle across a tectonic boundary. In his Introduction Prendick's nephew tells us that, 'my uncle passed out of human knowledge about latitude 5°S and latitude 105°W, and reappeared in the same part of the ocean after a space of eleven months,' and Prendick's story is regarded as so fantastic by his rescuers that they regard him as demented, 'judging that solitude and danger had made me mad' (148). Unlike many nineteenth century tales of science and exploration Wells chooses not to establish the scientific truth of *The Island of Dr. Moreau* and goes as far as to undermine the reliability of Prendick's account the we can make no sensible judgment of its quality. There are no independent witnesses to verify the facts and Prendick is a poor scientist admitting himself that he possesses 'a certain lack of practical sense' (143). The ambiguity regarding the location of the mysterious island frustrates any validation to such a degree that *The Island of Dr. Moreau* is 'without confirmation in its most essential particular' (Introduction), suggesting that the island is a liminal space at the border between fiction and reality.

Shipwrecked from the *Lady Vain*, Prendick enters the realm of the abject aboard the *Ipecacuanha* and, once brought onto the ship, he is unable to escape the abject. The name of the ship itself refers to the act of ejecting material from the body: the *cephaëlis ipecacuanha* being a South American herb used as an expectorate in the care of bronchitis and an emetic in the treatment of poison. From the moment of his rescue Prendick's responses to the situation in which he finds himself are clearly responses to the abject. For example, he expresses his anxiety before the abject upon seeing M'ling at the schooner's rail: 'That black figure, with its eyes of fire, struck down all my adult thoughts and feelings, and for a moment the forgotten horrors of childhood came back to my mind' (18). Here Prendick is brought back to an earlier phase of his development, and later our narrator finds himself struck dumb when confronted with the Beast Folk: ' 'He says nothing,' said the Satyr. 'Men have voices'' (96). He reacts to bodily fluids as one faced with the abject: 'I stopped aghast at the sight of blood' (42). Prendick's feelings towards the Beast Folk are ambiguous,

and when fleeing the Doctor's creations he states that 'deep down within me laughter and disgust struggled together' (63), and 'I felt sick with exertion and excitement' (106).

The abject perverse, and it is Dr. Moreau himself who personifies this. Indeed, Kristeva's description of the perverse could almost have been written for Moreau:

> It kills in the name of life – a progressive despot; it lives at the behest of death – an operator in genetic experimentation; it curbs the other's suffering for its own profit – a cynic (and a psychoanalyst); it establishes narcissistic power while pretending to reveal the abyss – an artist who practices his art as a "business."[7]

As we see from his creations on the island it is little more than to state the obvious to say that Moreau, driven by a Lamarckian insanity, is an operator in genetic experimentation, but the very art of his science is abject. Prendick informs us that Moreau is a notorious physiologist who has performed some experiments on the transfusion of blood, an act that involves the crossing of the boundary of the self in order to absorb one of the markers of the abject – blood. The 'Moreau Horrors' as the Doctor's experiments are called, have forced him to leave civilisation, his work threatening society's sense of its self and therefore he has been radically excluded to the mysterious island: 'He had to leave England. … The doctor was simply howled out of the country' (34). As a vivisectionist Moreau's skill lies in violating the limits of the body, penetrating the skin to reveal the internal to the outside world. On the island he has set to work in an effort to curb human suffering and through the application of science wishes to advance the evolution of man to a point where he is freed from the ancient traits of pleasure and pain. In doing so Moreau inflicts greater amounts of pain on his subjects than is scarcely imaginable, and Prendick describes the Doctor's experiments as 'wantonly cruel' (34). On hearing the puma's agony Prendick describes the terror contained within its cries "as if all the pain in the world had found a voice" (39). The Beast Folk recount this aspect of Moreau's cruelty in their liturgy: "His is the hand that wounds; His is the hand that heals" (64). In his perversity Moreau does not consider the ramifications of his experiments and casts

aside his creations when they come to offend his vanity. He tells Prendick that he has "never troubled about the ethics of the matter" (82), and that he despises the Beast Folk as, "they only sicken me with a sense of failure" (86).

Like his master Moreau's assistant Montgomery is an exile, forced to flee British society for a crime so terrible that he cannot bring himself to describe it. His error – "ten minutes on a foggy night" – cannot be articulated and so lies beyond language placing him as "an outcast from civilisation" (17). He repeatedly casts all men as animals, calling himself and Prendick "an ass" on numerous occasions, and the latter finds it difficult to identify his companion as a man: 'I felt that for Montgomery there was no help; that he was in truth half akin to the Beast Folk, unfitted for human kindred' (123).

It is Moreau's creations – the Beast Folk – that threaten Prendick's definition of himself as a civilised man. Although they have been inspired by an impulse that transformation by surgery will lead to progression, the Beast Folk present Prendick with the horror of evolution – that man is descended from apes – by capturing them at a moment when they appear half-formed, neither man nor beast: 'each of these creatures, despite its human form, its rag of clothing, and the rough humanity of its bodily form, had woven into it, … the unmistakable mark of the beast' (44). The ambiguity of the Beast Folk is demonstrated in their naming: the St. Bernard Dog-Man, the Rhinoceros-Mare, the Hyena-Swine, and, perhaps most significantly, the Ape-Man.

In the meeting of Prendick and the Ape-Man Wells dramatises the debate between Sir Richard Owen and Thomas Henry Huxley regarding the cerebral structure of Man and the Apes. Owen claimed that in Man, 'the brain presents an ascensive step in the development' that 'is peculiar to the genus Homo, and equally peculiar is the posterior horn of the lateral ventricle and the hippocampus minor.'[8] Huxley, in his typically aggressive style, gave a 'direct and unqualified contradiction' to fully demonstrate that the structure of the brain is 'neither peculiar to, nor characteristic of, man.'[9] On meeting Prendick, the Ape-Man identifies the physical similarity of their hands: ''He is a five-man, a five-man, a five-man … like me,' said the Ape-Man' (64). In drawing attention to this feature Wells eliminates the physiological

distance between his narrator and the Beast Folk. As Huxley phrases it: 'I have endeavoured to show that no absolute structural line of demarcation, wider than that between the animals which immediately succeed us in the scale, can be drawn between the animal world and ourselves…'[10] In removing this 'structural line of demarcation' Prendick is troubled by his inability to distinguish between the human and the bestial:

> I would see one of the clumsy bovine creatures…, and find myself asking, trying hard to recall how he differed from some really human yokel trudging home form his mechanical labours; or I would meet the Fox-Bear Woman's vulpine, shifty face, strangely human in its speculative cunning, and even imagine I had met it before in some city byway (94).

Having removed the physical distinction between modern man and his antecedents, Wells goes on to challenge the social rules that allow us to exclude the abject. Moreau as a tyrant has given the Beast Folk a liturgy by which to maintain their progressed state. Prendick tells us that those certain ideas implanted by the Doctor 'absolutely bounded their imaginations' (89). Wells – the progressive, the imagineer of the future, the Fabian – brings this element to the fore: if, accepting Charles Darwin's thesis of evolution by natural selection, and, perhaps more importantly for the author, Huxley's teachings, we find no fundamental separation between man and the 'animals which immediately succeed us in the scale' in terms of our physical being then what elevates man above the beasts is the culture that delimits our humanity. It is thus the Law that defines us as men, and being beyond the acceptable boundaries of society both Moreau and Montgomery trouble Prendick as he attempts to make sensible the boundaries that define himself: 'Montgomery and Moreau were too particular and individual to keep my general impressions of humanity well defined' (94).

It is the prohibitions of Moreau's Law that for the Beast Folk allow the abjection of the abject:

> Not to go on all-fours; *that* is the law. Are we not Men?
>
> Not to suck up Drink; *that* is the law. Are we not Men?
>
> Not to eat Flesh or Fish; *that* is the law. Are we not Men?
>
> Not to claw the Bark of trees; *that* is the law. Are we not Men?
>
> Not to chase other Men; *that* is the law. Are we not Men? (63).

The acceptance of the Law allows the Beast Folk to enter into the 'name-of-the-father' and through this we are able to link the process of evolution to the developmental stages of psychoanalysis: the concept of modern man as an evolved being – 'the third chimpanzee' – finds its corollary in the psychoanalytical concept of 'the third stage of development.' Moreau, the 'father,' expresses this to Prendick, as he,

> proceeded to point out that the possibilities of vivisection did not stop at a mere physical metamorphosis. A pig may be educated. The mental structure is even less determinate than the bodily. … Very much, indeed, of what we call moral education is such an artificial modification and perversion of instinct; pugnacity is trained into courteous self-sacrifice, and suppressed sexuality into religious emotion (79).

Moreau's law that limits the imagination of the Beast Folk is highly problematic in that, as noted above, the Doctor is a man 'untroubled' by ethics. If the abject is above all an ambiguity the horror of *The Island of Dr. Moreau* lies in its debasement of moral authority. The preacher who 'gibbered Big Thinks even as the Ape-Man had done' (150) can be read as more than a stab at Bishop Samuel Wilberforce by one of Huxley's students; he is by association with Moreau a 'moral evolutionist' so to speak, artificially modifying beasts to create men through the prohibitions of high Anglicanism.

In *Evolution and Ethics*, Huxley argued that nature was 'morally indifferent,'[11] that nature being violent and competitive was the antithesis of morality, so that ethics in fact arose in opposition to the evolutionary tendencies of nature:

> The practice of that which is ethically best – what we call goodness or virtue – involves a course of conduct which in all respects, is opposed to that which leads to success in the cosmic struggle for existence. In place of ruthless self-assertion it demands self-restraint; in place of thrusting aside, or treading down, all competitors it requires that the individual shall not merely respect, but shall help his fellows; its influence is directed, not so much to the survival of the fittest, as to the fitting of as many as possible to survive. It repudiates the gladiatorial theory of existence.[12]

For Huxley a nature devoid of morality was an 'ethical horror,'[13] and taking Kristeva as our starting point, such a nature must be radically excluded via the mechanisms of abjection. With the 'Moreau Horrors' Wells presents Huxley's thesis, but he goes much further than this. In turning Bishop Wilberforce's insulting query to Huxley – 'was it through his grandfather or his grandmother that [Huxley] claimed his descent from a monkey?' – back onto the preacher, Wells also brings into doubt the authority of an ethical system that takes no account of nature, as is found in Huxley's retort: 'he would be ashamed to be connected with a man who used great gifts to obscure the truth.'[14] Kristeva states that, 'abjection accompanies all religious structurings and reappears to be worked out in a new guise, at the time of their collapse.'[15] In essence it is a crisis of abjection that evolution brought to Victorian society, creating the need to establish new boundaries of the human self in the light of Darwin's obliteration of man's uniqueness. It is the attempt to rework the structure of the abject that underlies both the Bridgewater Treatises, and the clash between Wilberforce and Huxley at the annual meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science at Oxford in 1860.

For Wells nature and ethics are both required to construct the limits of humanity, as can be seen in 'Human Evolution, an Artificial Process,' an article published in 1896, the same year in which *The Island of Dr. Moreau* was published:

> In civilised man we have (1) an inherited factor, the natural man, who is the product of natural selection, the culminating ape, and a type of animal more obstinately unchangeable than any other living creature; and (2) an acquired factor, the artificial man, the highly parasitic creature of tradition, suggestion and reasoned thought. In the artificial man we have all that makes the comforts and securities of civilisation a possibility. That factor and civilisation have developed and will develop together. And in this view, what we call Morality becomes the padding of suggested emotional habits necessary to keep the round Paleaolithic savage in the square hole of the civilised state.[16]

Nature without morality is an ethical horror; but morality without nature is a scientific horror. Wells' 'in-between' position requires man to acknowledge he antecedents, to embrace the preconditions of his existence whilst simultaneously rejecting them in order to assert man's more civilised qualities.

With the death of Moreau the law that abjects the 'natural factor' of the Beast Folk collapses, and in doing so presents Prendick and Montgomery with an ethical dilemma that challenges their own sense of themselves as 'civilsed man.' In the absence of the Doctor, Prendick asks, 'what will happen with the Beast Folk?' Montgomery's answer mocks Prendick's 'acquired factor:'

> *I* don't know. I suppose those that were made of beasts of prey will make silly asses of themselves sooner or later. We can't massacre the lot. Can we? I suppose that's what your *humanity* would suggest? … But they'll change. They are sure to change. (121: italics in original).

And change they do. In the end the law cannot contain the Beast Folk's naturally evolved instincts for survival and soon enough they come to taste blood. This violation of the law sets in motion the regression of the Beast Folk as they shed their more human

characteristics, throwing into sharper relief man's origins. The Beast Folk return to walking on all fours, 'disregard the injunction of decency' and abandon every last stitch of clothing, and attempt 'monstrous public outrages upon the institution of monogamy' (141). Prendick emphasises their decreasing use of language as being particularly marked: "Can you imagine language, once clear-cut and exact, softening and guttering, losing shape and import, becoming mere lumps of sound again" (140). Prendick himself becomes pulled down by the collapse of the law, his clothes becoming ragged and his hair matted: 'In this way I became one among the Beast People in the Island of Dr. Moreau' (135). In confronting the truth of the theory of evolution Prendick is forced time and again to return to a place prior to signification; brought not to a state prior to the mirror phase but to one prior to *Homo Sapiens Sapiens*.

On his return to London Prendick finds it difficult to accept the world around him as recognisably human: "I could not persuade myself that the men and women I met were not also another, still passably human, Beast people, half-wrought into the outward image of human souls" (149). He finds himself unable to construct sensible boundaries in order to protect himself from being consumed by the symbolic order of late-Victorian British society: "When I lived in London the horror was well-nigh unsupportable. I could not get away from men; their voices came through windows; locked doors were flimsy safeguards" (150). Kristeva writes that, 'the abjection of the self would be the culminating form of that experience of the subject to which it is revealed that all its objects are based merely on the inaugural *loss* that laid the foundations of its own being.'[17] Evolution reveals to Prendick the fragile nature of his humanity, exposing his origins among the lower orders of nature, and, through witnessing the reversion of the Beast Folk and his own regression, allows him to re-experience the loss of his natural self. In the end Prendick's only solution is to leave for the country and absent himself from the realm of the other: the abjection of the self.

Notes

1. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of horror: an essay on abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press (1982): 1.

2. Ibid.: 2.

3. Ibid.: 13.

4. Ibid.: 14.

5. Ibid.: 9

6. H.G. Wells, *The Island of Dr. Moreau*. Harmondsworth: Penguin ([1896] 1946). Page references are given in the text.

7. Kristeva, op. cit.: 13.

8. Richard Owen, 'On the characters, principles of division, and the primary groups of the class mammalia,' *Proceedings of the Linnaean Society* 2 (1857): 19.

9. T.H. Huxley, *Man's place in nature and other essays*. London: J.M Dent (1906): 106.

10. Ibid.: 102.

11. T.H. Huxley, *Evolution and ethics and other essays*. New York: AMS Press ([1896] 1970): 80.

12. Ibid.: 82.

13. The phrase 'ethical horror' is taken from John Huntington, *The logic of fantasy: H.G. Wells and science fiction*. New York: Columbia University Press (1982): 13.

14. See Deborah Cadbury, *The dinosaur hunters: a story of scientific rivalry and the discovery of the prehistoric world*. London: Fourth Estate (2000); C.U.M. Smith, 'Owen and Huxley: unfinished business,' *Endeavour* 22 (3): 110-113.

15. Kristeva, op. cit.: 15.

16. H.G. Wells, 'Human evolution, an artificial process,' in Robert Philmus and David Y. Hughes (Eds.) *H.G. Wells: early writings in science and science fiction*. Berkeley: University of California Press (1975): 217.

17. Kristeva, op. cit.: 5.